

# Why Young People use Social Media for Sports: A Uses and Gratifications Perspective

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## Abstract

**Background/Objectives:** This study examined characteristics and trends in the ways college students utilize social media for college athletics. **Methods/Statistical Analysis:** An online survey was conducted at a Southwestern University. A total of 468 college students responded to the online survey. 391 valid survey responses were used to analyze the data. **Findings:** The results of this study suggested four motivations - entertainment, information seeking, social interaction and surveillance - for using social media of college athletics. Thus, information seeking and social interaction motivations, both motivations for using social media for college athletics, were related positively to gratification of social media use for college athletics. Younger users of social media for college athletics were more likely to use Facebook to gather college athletics information. In addition, Twitter users have higher channel loyalty in sports communication than do Facebook users. **Application/Improvements:** This study may contribute to understanding motivations and uses of social media in sports communication.

**Keywords:** College Athletics, Social Media, Uses and Gratification, Young People

## 1. Introduction

With the development of communication technology, social media, as new platforms of media, have attracted public attention in both academic and professional fields. In the field of mass communication, many previous studies have used a framework of uses and gratifications theory to understand motivations for using social media. However, these attempts rely on descriptions about the functions of social media and the ways of building relationships between organizations and their publics. Therefore, this study explored how fundamental motivations for using a social network site impact engagement of further activities in the same or different social media.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Motivations for using Social Media: Uses and Gratifications Perspectives

The uses and gratifications model is one of the most relevant mass communication theories. In addition, the theory has audience-based frameworks for looking at media; therefore, the theory has primarily focused on the psychological needs that explain why people use the media and what elements motivate them to engage in certain media-use behaviors<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, uses and gratifications theory has frequently been used in traditional media, such as newspaper and television. With the devel-

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opment of the Internet, audiences have greater individual and group control over mass communications than ever before. Internet is driven by individual users with individual gratifications; as such the uses and gratifications model is the best theoretical approach for understanding the Internet as a medium<sup>2</sup>. In this context, social media have the unique capacity to transform individuals from content consumers to content producers by enabling a more mainstream, two-way interaction with media<sup>3</sup>.

College students, in particular, continue to comprise a significant portion of social network site users, even though these sites are accessed by a variety of demographics. College students have taken a larger portion of social media markets, so their patterns of social media use are critical for researchers and professionals in building communication strategies in the social media. In this context, there are two main reasons why college students use social media: For a social connection used to keep in touch with current and past friends and for information sharing about social and other events<sup>4</sup>.

Differing social media attempts to capture different audiences and users by serving different purposes<sup>5</sup>. For instance, Facebook spent its infancy being exclusive to college students, only allowing users who possessed dot-edu e-mail addresses. In its early years, Facebook enabled students to transition to college from high school and create new networks and still does today. Therefore, students at more than 2,200 colleges and universities communicate and connect with other students.

Twitter is also recognized as an important tool for communication - whether for business or for pleasure. The main difference between Twitter and other social media might be that a message on Twitter is limited to 140 total characters. These short messages are referred to as tweets and can be sent across a wide variety of media. Tweets are not only displayed on user's profile page, but they can also be delivered directly to followers via instant messaging, Short Message Service (SMS), Really Simple Syndication (RSS), email or other social network platforms, such as Facebook<sup>6</sup>.

As discussed above, college students are very familiar with these two forms of social media. Most prior studies have mainly focused on their functions in building relationships with other people<sup>7</sup>. However, these social media are also utilized as a function of news media, as well as a tool for building relationships with other people<sup>8</sup>. In particular, college athletic news coverage is primarily targeted to college students to encourage or maintain a high

level of loyalty on their schools. Therefore, it is meaningful to look at the role of these social media in gathering college athletic news.

In order to explore how social media are used as news media, this study consisted of two parts. The first part involved exploring motivations for using social media to find information on college athletics. The second part involved examining how these motivations are related to gratification of media use and media preference when college students gather college athletics news. The following research questions were proposed:

**RQ 1:** What motivations drive the use of social media for college athletics?

**RQ 2:** How are these motivations associated with gratification of social media use, controlling for gender and age?

**RQ 3:** How are these motivations associated with channel preference for social media, controlling for gender and age?

## 3. Method

### 3.1 General Procedure

In order to answer the research questions, an online survey was conducted at a Southwestern university. Before conducting the online survey, this study posted an invitation message in social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) for college athletics. A total of 468 college students responded to the online survey. After the deletion of 77 incomplete survey responses, 391 valid survey responses were used to analyze the data. Of respondents who identified their gender, 35.3% were male ( $N = 136$ ) and 64.7% were female ( $N = 249$ ). Six respondents chose not to provide information on their gender. Regarding academic classification of respondents, 17.1% were freshmen ( $N = 66$ ), 16.6% were sophomores ( $N = 64$ ), 15.6% were juniors ( $N = 60$ ), 24.7% were seniors ( $N = 95$ ) and 26.0% were graduate students ( $N = 100$ ).

### 3.2 Measurement

Sixteen questions were designed to assess participants' social media usage motivations, with a progression from questions about social media use in general to questions that focused on students' use of the popular social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter)<sup>9</sup>. Thus, five questions were used to measure media preference and media gratification

**Table 1.** Result of exploratory factor analysis on motivations of using social media for college athletics

Items	Extracted Factors			
	Entertainment	Information-seeking	Social interaction	Surveillance
I use social media because it is enjoyable.	.97			
I use social media because it's entertaining.	.89			
I use social media to pass the time.	.58			
I use social media to gain useful information about any topic.		.80		
Social media is a good way to research sports stories.		.78		
I use social media to learn about unknown things.		.66		
I use social media to find out what others are saying/doing.			.89	
I use social media to keep up with what is going on.			.53	
I use social media to meet people with interests similar to mine.				.83
I freely express myself on social media.				
Eigenvalue	5.37	1.79	1.17	1.04
Percent variance accounted for	35.79	47.69	55.50	62.42
Cronbach's Alpha	.83	.76	.66	.77
Note: Variables are sorted by highest loading				

for gathering college athletics information. Participants were also instructed to indicate their response to each question on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Motivations of using Social Media for College Athletics

To construct motivations of using social media for college athletics, this study employed Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), which is useful in searching for the latent structure of observed variables<sup>10</sup>. To accomplish this, the 16 statements were subjected to a series of principle axis factoring with oblique rotations. After conducting the first factor analysis, a clear classification system representing four distinct factors was observed as shown in Table 1.

The eigenvalues for the four extracted factors ranged from 1.04 to 5.37 and accounted for 62.4% of the total variance. Based on the original conceptualization of the previous studies on uses and gratification, the four extracted factors were labeled as entertainment motivation, information seeking motivation, social interaction motivation and surveillance motivation. The Cronbach's

alpha values ranged from .66 to .83. Those Cronbach's alpha values satisfied the basic standard (over .60) because this study is exploratory regarding motivations for social media use of college athletics. Additionally, gratification of media use had a reliability value of .83, which highly satisfied the standard of the Cronbach's alpha value.

### 4.2 Relationships between Motivations of using Social Media for College Athletics and Media Gratification

This study examined the relationship between motivations of social media for college athletics and media gratification. The analysis controlled for age, media preference and gender with a hierarchical regression model, entering gender, media preference and age as the first step, followed by the four motivations of using social media for college athletics.

Results of the hierarchical regression analysis revealed that both steps were statistically significant as shown in Table 2. The first step, with age, media preference and gender, accounted for 4% of the variance in gratification of social media use for college athletics ( $R^2 = .04$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The second step, with social media motivations, accounted for 13% of the variance in gratification of social media use ( $R^2 = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

In the first step, only media preference for Twitter ( $\beta = .13, p < .01$ ) had a significant positive association with gratification of social media use for college athletics. This could mean that users of social media for college athletics are more likely to satisfy with social media use for college athletics if they prefer using Twitter.

**Table 2.** Hierarchical regression analysis of predictors of media gratification

Variables	B	SE B	$\beta$
Step 1			
Age	-.05	.04	-.08
Gender (Male = 1, Female = 2)	-.15	.11	-.07
Media Preference for Twitter	.09	.04	.13*
Media Preference for Facebook	.11	.06	.09
Step 2			
Age	-.03	.04	-.04
Gender (Male = 1, Female = 2)	-.12	.11	-.06
Media Preference for Twitter	.04	.03	.06
Media Preference for Facebook	.00	.07	.00
Entertainment motivations	.04	.09	.03
Information-seeking motivations	.15	.07	.12*
Social interaction motivations	.27	.06	.26**
Surveillance motivations	-.02	.09	-.02
Note: $R^2 = .04$ for Step 1; $R^2 = .13$ for Step 2 * $p < .05$ ; ** $p < .001$			

When motivations of using social media entered at the second step, information seeking motivations ( $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ) had a significantly positive influence on gratification of social media use for college athletics. Additionally, social interaction motivations ( $\beta = .26, p < .001$ ) had a significantly positive relationship with gratification of social media use for college athletics. It is evident that if users of social media for college athletics who have a preference for Twitter or has information-seeking and social interaction motivations, they are satisfied with the use of social media when gathering athletic news.

### 4.3 Relationships between Motivations of using Social Media for college Athletics and Channel Preference for Facebook

Results of the following hierarchical regression analysis provided information on how motivations of using social media for college athletics were related to channel preference for Facebook when users want to gather college athletics information as shown in Table 3. The first model accounted for 8% of the variance in channel preference on Facebook ( $R^2 = .08, p < .001$ ). The second model accounted for 17% of the variance in channel preference for Facebook ( $R^2 = .17, p < .001$ ).

In the first step, as generally expected, media preference for Facebook ( $\beta = .22, p < .001$ ) had a significantly positive association with channel preference for Facebook. This result indicates that users of social media for college athletics are more likely to use Facebook to gather athletic news when they have channel preference for Facebook. Also, this pattern is greater with younger Facebook users because age ( $\beta = -.13, p < .05$ ) had a significantly negative relationship with channel preference on Facebook. These results can be interpreted to mean that younger Facebook users have a higher tendency to connect to Facebook when they want to get college athletics information.

When motivations of using social media for college athletics entered at step 2, information-seeking motivations ( $\beta = .25, p < .001$ ) had a significantly positive association with channel preference for Facebook. Additionally, social interaction motivations ( $\beta = .14, p < .01$ ) had a significantly positive relationship with channel preference for Facebook. It is evident that users of social media for college athletics are likely to connect to Facebook if they have information-seeking or social interaction motivations.

When motivations of using social media entered at the second step, information seeking motivations ( $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ) had a significantly positive influence on gratification of social media use for college athletics. Additionally, social interaction motivations ( $\beta = .26, p < .001$ ) had a significantly positive relationship with gratification of social media use for college athletics. It is evident that if users of social media for college athletics who have a preference for Twitter or has information-seeking and social interaction motivations, they are satisfied with the use of social media when gathering athletic news.

### 4.4 Relationships between Motivations of using Social Media for College Athletics and Channel Preference for Twitter

The next hierarchical regression analysis showed the relationships between channel preference for Twitter and motivations of using social media for college athletics. Results of the hierarchical regression analysis revealed that both steps were statistically significant as shown in Table 4. In the first step, age, media preference and gender accounted for 40% of the variance in channel preference for Twitter ( $R^2 = .40, p < .001$ ). In the second step, motivations of using social media for college athletics accounted for 41% of the variance in gratification of social media use for college athletics ( $R^2 = .41, p < .001$ ).

In the first step, as generally expected, media preference for Twitter had a significantly positive association with channel preference for Twitter when users want to gather athletic information ( $\beta = .62, p < .001$ ), while media

preference for Facebook had a significantly negative relationship with channel preference for Twitter ( $\beta = -.18, p < .001$ ). This result suggests that Twitter users are more likely to connect to Twitter when they want to gather college athletics information rather than are Facebook users. Also, if college athletics social media users has a higher level of media preference on Facebook, they are not likely to use Twitter when gather athletic news.

**Table 3.** Hierarchical regression analysis of predictors of channel preference for Facebook

Variables	B	SE B	$\beta$
Step 1			
Age	-.10	.04	-.12*
Gender (Male = 1, Female = 2)	.08	.12	.03
Media Preference for Twitter	.01	.04	.01
Media Preference for Facebook	.30	.07	.22**
Step 2			
Age	-.08	.04	-.10*
Gender (Male = 1, Female = 2)	.05	.12	.02
Media Preference for Twitter	-.05	.04	-.06
Media Preference for Facebook	.13	.08	.10
Entertainment motivations	-.02	.11	-.01
Information-seeking motivations	.35	.08	.25**
Social interaction motivations	.17	.06	.14*
Surveillance motivations	.08	.10	.05
Note: $R^2 = .08$ for Step 1; $R^2 = .17$ for Step 2 * $p < .05$ ; ** $p < .001$			

When motivations of using social media for college athletics entered at the second step, there were no significant relations between motivations of using social media and channel preference for Twitter. However, media preference for Twitter had a highly positive relationship with channel preference for Twitter ( $\beta = .61, p < .001$ ), while media preference for Facebook was negatively related to channel preference on Twitter ( $\beta = -.20, p < .001$ ).

## 5. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to use a uses and gratifications perspective to understand how young people use social media for college athletics. Overall, the results of this study suggested four motivations - entertainment, information seeking, social interaction and surveillance

- for using social media for college athletics. Media preference for Twitter had a significantly positive association with gratification of social media use for college athletics. Thus, information seeking and social interaction motivations, both motivations for using social media for college athletics, were related positively to gratification of social media use for college athletics. In addition, younger users of social media for college athletics were more likely to use Facebook to gather college athletics information. In addition, users of social media for college athletics selected Facebook as a channel for gathering college athletics information if they had information seeking and social interaction motivations for using social media for college athletics. Yet, there were no significant relationships between four motivations of using college athletic social media and channel preference on Twitter.

**Table 4.** Hierarchical regression analysis of predictors of channel preference for Twitter

Variables	B	SE B	$\beta$
Step 1			
Age	-.04	.03	-.05
Gender (Male = 1, Female = 2)	.07	.10	.03
Media Preference for Twitter	.51	.03	.62**
Media Preference for Facebook	-.26	.06	-.18**
Step 2			
Age	-.04	.04	-.05
Gender (Male = 1, Female = 2)	.06	.11	.02
Media Preference for Twitter	.51	.03	.61**
Media Preference for Facebook	-.30	.07	-.20**
Entertainment motivations	-.07	.09	-.04
Information-seeking motivations	.09	.07	.06
Social interaction motivations	.00	.06	.00
Surveillance motivations	.10	.09	.04
Note: $R^2 = .40$ for Step 1; $R^2 = .41$ for Step 2 * $p < .05$ ; ** $p < .001$			

By reviewing those results, this study suggests implications regarding frameworks of use and gratification. First, there are four motivations for college students' use of social media for college athletics. Social media for college athletics are used for the purposes of entertainment, information seeking, social interaction and surveillance. The main motivation for use of the social media is entertainment. Therefore, this result indicates that college



students consider how funny or entertaining social media for college athletics are when they consider joining them.

Second, users of social media for college athletics who prefer Twitter are likely to satisfy media use when they want to obtain college athletic information<sup>11</sup>. Also, information seeking and social interaction motivations have a significantly positive relationship with gratification of social media use for college athletics. These results suggest that social media users who prefer Twitter tend to have a higher level of gratification of media use for obtaining college athletic news than do users who prefer Facebook. Twitter has a limitation on the number of characters, so it basically focuses on results of athletic games or simple information regarding athletic events. This situation may help college students easily understand college athletic news. Users of social media for college athletics who have information-seeking or social interaction motivations for using social media have a significantly positive relationship with media gratification when they obtain college athletic news. This result suggests that social media also serve as a channel for gathering information. That is, users of social media for college athletics connect to the social media when they want to know information regarding what is happening with their college sports teams.

Additionally, social media for college athletics have functions to encourage interactions among users. The users utilize their college athletics information to communicate with other students and build online relationships with other users of social media for college athletics. Further, social interaction motivations had a more positive relationship with media gratification than did information-seeking motivations. This suggests that practitioners and managers in social media for college athletics should consider more functions for building online relationships among users to increase media gratification. These functions also serve as ways to encourage frequent visits to the social media for college athletics.

Third, female users of social media for college athletics prefer to use Facebook when they search for college athletics information. This result implies that there are strategic ways of communicating with different gender groups. For example, the sports market is dominated by males, so females are often considered to be a minority in this market. However, many researchers in the field of sports marketing suggest that females can be one of the most important groups in the market. Thus, it is critical for communication practitioners and managers in the sports

market to encourage females to participate in the market. In this sense, this study suggests potential communication strategies for encouraging females to participate in the sports market. Female users of social media for college athletics satisfied media use for gathering college athletics information when they used Facebook. Practitioners and managers in sports communication should focus more on Facebook as a tool for communicating with females.

Moreover, younger users of social media for college athletics also are likely to use Facebook when searching for college athletics information. This suggests that age difference can play a critical role in selecting social media for college athletics as a channel for gathering college athletics information. An additional ANOVA analysis indicates that users of social media for college athletics have different media selections based on student classifications (i.e. freshman, sophomore, junior, senior and graduate). For college students, age can play a critical role in determining a channel to obtain college athletics information through social media.

Finally, the results of this study revealed that users of social media for college athletics had polarized channel preferences when they gathered college athletics information. As generally expected, media preference for Facebook was related to channel preference for Facebook for gathering college athletics information, while media preference for Twitter was related to channel preference for Twitter when students wanted to gather college athletics information. However, media preference for Facebook was negatively related to channel preference for Twitter, vice versa. This result implies that users of social media for college athletics select a medium and primarily use the medium if they are familiar with the platform's interface or operating system. Fundamentally, Facebook has unique characteristics that differ from what Twitter offers. This suggests that communication practitioners should create different communication strategies regarding different characteristics of social media platforms.

Users of social media for college athletics who have a preference for Twitter are more likely to choose Twitter as a channel for obtaining college athletics news story than are users who have a preference for Facebook. This indicates indirectly that Twitter users have higher channel loyalty in sports communication. This result provides ways of managing social media for college athletics. That is, communication practitioners and managers should carefully understand regarding why users want to use

Twitter as a college athletics information-gathering-channel. Also, they should pay more attention to managing communication strategies to keep a high level of Twitter users' channel preference.

Even though this study provides numerous ideas for academic and practical fields, it also has some limitations as far as explaining generalized motivations for using social media among college students. This study mainly focused on motivations of using social media for college athletics, so the results cannot apply to social media uses in other areas, such as corporate and political communication. The research sample was based at a university in the Southwest region of the United States. As this study used a convenience sample, the results cannot be generalized to the rest of the United States.

## 6. Acknowledgment

Funding for this paper was provided by Namseoul University.

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